

# Yvonne

There is always a moment in childhood when the door opens and lets the future in . . .

— Graham Greene: *The Power and the Glory*

Something I owe to the soil that grew —

More to the life that fed —

But most to *Allah* who gave me two

Separate sides to my head.

— Rudyard Kipling: *Kim*

**I** OF COURSE do not believe that it is “Allah” who determines these things. (Salman Rushdie, commenting on my book *god Is Not Great*, remarked rather mordantly that the chief problem with its title was a lack of economy: that it was in other words exactly one word too long.) But whatever one’s ontology may be, it will always seem tempting to believe that everything must have a first cause or, if nothing quite as grand as that, at the very least a definite beginning. And on that point I have no vagueness or indecision. I do know a little of how I came to be in two minds. And *this* is how it begins with me:  
I am standing on a ferry-boat that is crossing a lovely harbor. I have since learned many versions and variations of the word “blue,” but let’s say that a brilliant if slightly harsh sunshine illuminates a cerulean sky-vault and an azure sea and also limns the way in which these two textures collide and reflect. The resulting tinge of green is in lambent contrast with the darker

vegetation on the hillsides and makes an almost blinding combination when, allied with those discrepant yet melding blues, it hits the white buildings that reach down to the edge of the water. As a flash of drama and beauty and seascape and landscape, it's as good an inaugural memory as one could wish.

Since this little voyage is occurring in about 1952 and I have been born in 1949, I have no means of appreciating that this is the Grand Harbor at Valletta, the capital of the tiny island-state of Malta and one of the finest Baroque and Renaissance cities of Europe. A jewel set in the sea between Sicily and Libya, it has been for centuries a place of the two-edged sword between the Christian and Muslim worlds. Its population is so overwhelmingly Roman Catholic that there are, within the walled city, a great plethora of ornate churches, the cathedral being decorated by the murals of Caravaggio himself, that seductive votary of the higher wickedness. The island withstood one of the longest Turkish sieges in the history of "Christendom." But the Maltese tongue is a dialect version of the Arabic spoken in the Maghreb and is the only Semitic language to be written in a Latin script. If you happen to attend a Maltese Catholic church during Mass, you will see the priest raising the Communion Host and calling on "Allah," because this after all is the local word for "god." My first memory, in other words, is of a ragged and jagged, but nonetheless permeable and charming, frontier between two cultures and civilizations.

I am, at this stage, far too secure and confident to register anything of the kind. (If I speak a few phrases of Maltese, it is not with a view to becoming bilingual or multicultural but in order to address my priest-ridden nannies and the kitchen maids with their huge broods of children. This was the place where I first learned to see the picture of Catholicism as one of plump shepherds and lean sheep.) \* Malta is effectively a British colony — its most heroic recent chapter the withstanding of a hysterical aerial bombardment by Hitler and Mussolini — and it has remained a solid possession of the Royal Navy, in which my father proudly serves, ever since the Napoleonic Wars. Much more to the immediate point, I am standing on the deck of this vessel in company with my mother, who holds my hand when I desire it and also lets me scamper off to explore if I insist.

\* Everything about Christianity is contained in the pathetic image of "the flock."

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So, all things being considered, not too shaky a start. I am well-dressed and well-fed, with a full head of hair and a slender waist, and operating in a context of startling architectural and natural beauty, and full of *brio* and self-confidence, and on a boat in the company of a beautiful woman who loves me.

I didn't call her by this name at the time, but "Yvonne" is the echo with which I most piercingly and yearningly recall her memory to me. After all, it *was* her name, and it was what her friends called her, and my shell-like ear detected quite early on a difference between this and the various comfortable Nancys and Joans and Ethels and Marjories who — sterling types all — tended to be the spouses and helpmeets of my father's brother-officers. *Yvonne*. A bit of class there: a bit of style. A touch or dash of garlic and olive and rosemary to sweeten the good old plain English loaf from which, the fact must be faced, I was also sliced. But more of this when I come to Commander Hitchens. I mustn't pretend to remember more than I really do, but I am very aware that it makes a great difference to have had, in early life, a passionate lady in one's own corner.

For example, noticing that I had skipped the baby-talk stage and gone straight to speaking in complete sentences (even if sometimes derivative ones such as, according to family legend, "Let's all go and have a drink at the club"), she sat me down one day and produced an elementary phonetic reading-book, or what used to be known to the humble as "a speller." This concerned the tedious adventures of a woodland elf or goblin called Lob-agob (his name helpfully subdivided in this way) but, by the time I was done with it, I was committed for life to having some sort of reading matter within reach at all times, and was always to be ahead of my class in reading-age. By this period, however, our family had left Malta and been posted to the much more austere surroundings of Rosyth, another naval base on the east coast of Scotland. I think Malta may have been a sort of high point for Yvonne: all British people were a cut above the rest in a semicolony and there was that club for cocktails and even the chance of some local "help." Not that she longed to wallow in idleness but, having endured a girlhood of scarcity, slump, and then war, she couldn't have minded a bit of color and Mediterranean dash and may well have felt she'd earned it. (On our way back from Malta we stopped for a few hours at Nice: her and my first taste of the

Riviera. I remember how happy she looked.) The grayness and drabness of “married quarters” in drizzle-flogged Fifeshire must have hit her quite hard. But she and my father had first been thrown together precisely because of drizzle and austerity, and the grim, grinding war against the Nazis. He, a career Navy man, had been based at Scapa Flow, the huge, cold-water sound in the Orkney Islands which helped establish and maintain British control over the North Sea. She was a volunteer in the Women’s Royal Naval Service or, in the parlance of the day, a “Wren.” (My most cherished photograph of her shows her in uniform.) After a short wartime courtship they had been married in early April 1945, not long before Adolf Hitler had shoved a gun into his own (apparently halitosis-reeking) mouth. One young and eager girl from a broken Jewish home in Liverpool, wed to one man twelve years her senior from a sternly united if somewhat repressed Baptist family in Portsmouth. Wartime was certainly full of such improvised unions, in which probably both at first counted themselves fortunate, but I know for a fact that while my father never stopped considering himself lucky, my mother soon ceased to do so. She also decided, for a reason that I believe I can guess, to engage in the not-so-small deception of not mentioning to anyone in the Hitchens family that she was of Jewish descent. She herself had wanted to “pass” as English after noticing some slight unpleasantness being visited on my grandmother, who in the 1930s toiled in the millinery business. And Yvonne could pass, too, as a light brunette with hazel-ish eyes and (always to my fancy and imagination) a “French” aspect. But more to the point, I now feel sure, she did not want either me or my brother to be taxed with *die Judenfrage* — the Jewish question. What I do not know is quite what this concealment or reticence cost her. What I can tell you something about is what it meant for me.

The paradox was this: in postwar Britain as in Britain at all other times, there was only one tried and tested form of social mobility. The firstborn son (at least) had to be educated at a private school, with an eventual view to attending a decent university. But school fees were high, and the shoals of class and accent and social position somewhat difficult for first-timers to navigate. Neither of my parents had been to college. One of my earliest coherent memories is of sitting in my pajamas at the top of the stairs, eavesdropping on a domestic argument. It was an easy enough one to follow. Yvonne wanted

me to go to a fee-paying school. My father — “The Commander” as we sometimes ironically and affectionately called him — made the heavy but obvious objection that it was well beyond our means. Yvonne was having none of this. “If there is going to be an upper class in this country,” she stated with decision, “then Christopher is going to be in it.” I may not have the words exactly right — could she have said “ruling class” or “Establishment,” terms that would then have been opaque to me? — but the purport was very clear. And, from my hidden seat in the gallery, I silently applauded. Thus a further paradox discloses itself: my mother was much less British than my father but wanted above all for me to be an English gentleman. (You, dear reader, be the judge of how well *that* worked out.) And, though she wanted to keep me near, she needed to argue hotly for my sake that I be sent away.

I registered this contradiction very acutely as, alternating between the beams and smiles of maternal encouragement and the hot tears of separation, she escorted me to my boarding school at the age of eight. I shall always be slightly sorry that I didn’t make more of an effort to pretend that I was desolated, too. I knew I would miss Yvonne but I suppose by then I’d had the essential experience of being loved without ever being spoiled. I was eager to get on with it. And at the school, which I had already visited as a prospective boarder, there could be found a library with shelves that seemed inexhaustible. There was nothing like that at our house, and Yvonne had taught me to love books. The cruelest thing I ever did, at the end of my first term away from home, was to come home for Christmas and address her as “Mrs. Hitchens.” I shan’t forget her shocked face. It was the enforced etiquette to address all females at the school, from masters’ wives to staff, in this way. But I still suspect myself of having committed a mean little attention-getting subterfuge.

This perhaps helps explain the gradual diminution of my store of memory of Yvonne: from the ages of eight to eighteen I was to be away from home for most of the year and the crucial rites of passage, from the pains of sexual maturity to the acquisition of friends, enemies, and an education, took place outside the bonds of family. Nonetheless, I always somehow knew how she was, and could generally guess what I didn’t know, or what was to be inferred from between the lines of her weekly letters.

My father was a very good man and a worthy and honest and hardworking one, but he bored her, as did much of the remainder of her life. “The

one unforgivable sin,” she used to say, “is to be boring.” What she wanted was the metropolis, with cocktail parties and theater trips and smart friends and witty conversation, such as she had once had as a young thing in prewar Liverpool, where she’d lived near Penny Lane and briefly known people like the madly gay Frank Hauser, later director of the Oxford Playhouse, and been introduced by a boyfriend to the work of the handsome Ulster poet Louis MacNeice, contemporary of Auden and author of *Autumn Journal* and (her favorite) *The Earth Compels*. What she got instead was provincial life in a succession of small English towns and villages, first as a Navy wife and then as the wife of a man who, “let go” by the Navy after a lifetime of service, worked for the rest of his days in bit-part jobs as an accountant or “bursar.” It is a terrible thing to feel sorry for one’s mother or indeed father. And it’s an additionally awful thing to feel this and to know the impotence of the adolescent to do anything at all about it. Worse still, perhaps, is the selfish consolation that it isn’t really one’s job to rear one’s parents. Anyway, I knew that Yvonne felt that life was passing her by, and I knew that the money that could have given her the occasional glamorous holiday or trip to town was instead being spent (at her own insistence) on school fees for me and my brother, Peter (who had arrived during our time in Malta), so I resolved at least to work extremely hard and be worthy of the sacrifice. She didn’t just sit there while I was away. She tried instead to become a force in the world of fashion. Perhaps answering the call of her milliner forebears, but at any rate determined not to succumb to the prevalent dowdiness of postwar Britain, she was forever involved in schemes for brightening the apparel of her friends and neighbors. “One thing I *do* have,” she used to say with a slightly defensive tone, as if she lacked some other qualities, “is a bit of good taste.” I personally thought she had the other qualities too: on those official holidays when parents would visit my boarding school and many boys almost expired in advance from the sheer dread of embarrassment, Yvonne never did, or wore, anything that I could later be teased about (and this was in the days when women still wore hats). She was invariably the prettiest and brightest of the mothers, and I could always kiss her gladly, right in front of everyone else, without any fear of mushiness, lipstick-stains, or other disasters. In those moments I would have dared anyone to tease me about her, and I was small for my age. However, the dress-shop business didn’t go well. If it wasn’t for bad luck,

in fact, Yvonne would have had no luck at all. With various friends and partners she tried to float a store called Pandora's Box, I remember, and another called Susannah Munday, named for an ancestress of ours on the paternal Hampshire side. These enterprises just didn't fly, and I couldn't think why not except that the local housewives were just too drab and myopic and penny-pinching. I used to love the idea of dropping by as I went shopping, so that she could show me off to her friends and have a general shriek and gossip over some coffee, but I could always tell that business wasn't good. With what a jolt of recognition did I read, years later, V.S. Naipaul's uncanny diagnosis of the situation in *The Enigma of Arrival*. He was writing about Salisbury, which was close enough to Portsmouth:

A shop might be just two or three minutes' walk from the market square, but could be off the main shopping track. Many little businesses failed — quickly, visibly. Especially pathetic were the shops that — not understanding that people with important shopping to do usually did it in London — aimed at style. How dismal those boutiques and women's dress shops quickly became, the hysteria of their owners showing in their windows!

I might want to quarrel with the choice of the word "hysteria," but if you substituted "quiet desperation," you might not be far off. Even years later, when the term "struggle" had become for me almost synonymous with the words "liberation" or "working class," I never forgot that the petit bourgeois knew about struggling, too.

I am speaking of the time of my adolescence. As the fact of this development became inescapably evident (in the early fall of 1964, according to my best memory) and as it came time to go back to school again, my mother took me for a memorable drive along Portsmouth Harbor. I think I had an idea of what was coming when I scrambled into the seat alongside her. There had been a few fatuous and bungled attempts at "facts of life" chats from my repressed and awkward schoolmasters (and some hair-raising speculations from some of my more advanced schoolmates: I myself being what was euphemistically called "a late developer"), and I somehow knew that my father would very emphatically *not* want to undertake any gruff moment of manly heart-to-heart with his firstborn — as indeed my mother confirmed by way of explanation for

what she was herself about to say. In the next few moments, guiding the Hillman smoothly along the road, she managed with near-magical deftness and lightness to convey the idea that, if you felt strongly enough about somebody and learned to take their desires, too, into account, the resulting mutuality and reciprocity would be much more than merely worthwhile. I don't know quite how she managed this, and I still marvel at the way that she both recognized and transcended my innocence, but the outcome was a deep peace and satisfaction that I can yet feel (and, on some especially good subsequent occasions, have been able to call clearly to my mind).

She never liked any of my girlfriends, ever, but her criticisms were sometimes quite pointed ("Honestly darling, she's madly sweet and everything but she does look a bit like a pit-pony.") yet she never made me think that she was one of those mothers who can't surrender their sons to another female. She was so little of a Jewish mother, indeed, that she didn't even allow me to know about her ancestry: something that I do very slightly hold against her. She wasn't overprotective, she let me roam and hitchhike about the place from quite a young age, she yearned only for me to improve my education (aha!), she had two books of finely bound poetry apart from the MacNeice (Rupert Brooke, and Palgrave's *Golden Treasury*), which I will die to save even if my house burns down; she drove me all the way to Stratford for the Shakespeare anniversary in 1966 and on the wintry day later that year that I was accepted by Balliol College, Oxford, I absolutely *knew* that she felt at least some of the sacrifice and tedium and weariness of the years had been worthwhile. In fact, that night at a fairly rare slap-up dinner "out" is almost the only family celebration of unalloyed joy that (perhaps because it was mainly if not indeed exclusively about me) I can ever recall.

It pains me to say that last thing, but the truth is that I can remember many nice country walks and even one epic game of golf with my father, and many good times with my brother, Peter, as well, and more moments with Yvonne than I can possibly tell about here. But like many families we didn't always succeed in managing as a "unit." It was better if there were guests, or other relatives, or at least a pet animal to which we could all address ourselves. I'll close this reflection with a memory that I cannot omit.

We had been for a family holiday — I think it may have been the last one we all had together — on the Devonshire coast at the John Betjeman-style

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resort of Budleigh Salterton. I hadn't thought it had been too tense by Hitchens standards, but on the last day my father announced that the men of the family would be going home by train. Yvonne, it seemed, wanted a bit of time to herself and was going to take the car and get home by easy and leisurely stages. I found I approved of this idea: I could see her cruising agreeably along in the roadster, smoking the odd cigarette in that careless and carefree way she had, stopping as and when it pleased her, falling into casual and witty conversation at some of the better hostelrys along the roads. Why on earth not? She was way overdue for a bit of sophistication and refinement and a few days of damn-the-expense indulgence.

She was home the next day, with her neck in a brace, having been painfully rear-ended by some idiot before she had even properly embarked on the treat that was rightfully hers. My father silently and efficiently took charge of all the boring insurance and repair details, while Yvonne looked, for the first time I had ever seen her, deflated and defeated. I have never before or since felt so utterly sorry for anybody, or so powerless to assist, or so uneasy about the future, or so unable to say *why* I was so uneasy. To this day, I can't easily stand to hear the Danny Williams version of her favorite "Moon River," because it captures the sort of pining note that is the more painful for being inchoate. While shifting scenery at the Oxford Playhouse not long afterward (for one of the first wage-packets I ever earned) I saw a production of *The Cherry Orchard* from the wings — a good point of vantage for a Chekhov play, incidentally — and felt a pang of vicarious identification with the women who would never quite make it to the bright lights of the big city, and who couldn't even count on the survival of their provincial idyll, either. Oh Yvonne, if there was any justice you should have had the opportunity to enjoy at least one of these, if not both.

She soon afterward gave me a black-tie dinner jacket as a present to take to Oxford, being sure that I'd need formal wear for all the Union debates and other high-toned events at which I would doubtless be starring. I did actually don this garment a few times, but by the middle of 1968 Yvonne had become mainly used to reading about my getting arrested while wearing jeans and donkey jacket and carrying some insurgent flag. I have to say that she didn't complain as much as she might have done ("though I do rather hate it, darling, when my friends ring up and pretend that they are *so sorry* to see you

on TV in that way”). Her politics had always been liberal and humanitarian, and she had a great abhorrence of any sort of cruelty or bullying: she fondly thought that my commitments were mainly to the underdog. For my father’s flinty and adamant Toryism she had little sympathy. (I do remember her once asking me why it was that so many professional revolutionaries were childless: a question which seemed beside the point at the time but has recurred to me occasionally since.) Unless the police actually came to the house with a warrant — which they did, once, after I had been arrested again while still on bail for a previous offense — she barely uttered a moan. And I, well, I was impatient to outgrow my family and fly the nest, and in the vacations from Oxford as well as after I graduated and moved impatiently and ambitiously to London, I didn’t go home any more than I had to.

Even after all these years I find I can hardly bear to criticize Yvonne, but there was something about which I could and did tease her. She had a slight — actually a definite — weakness for “New Age” and faddish and cultish attractions. When I was a boy it was Gayelord Hauser’s “Look Younger, Live Longer” regimen: a smirking charmer’s catch-penny diet-book that enthralled about half the lower-middle-class women we knew. As time progressed, it was the bogus refulgences of Kahlil Gibran and the sickly tautologies of *The Prophet*. As I say, she could take some raillery about this from me, at least when it was about unwanted poundage or unreadable verses. But (and this is very often the awful fate of the one who teases) I did not realize how much unhappiness was involved, and I did not remotely appreciate how much damage had been done, until it was far too late. Allow me to relate this to you as it unfolded itself to me.

Going back to Oxford one day, and after I had moved to London and had begun working at the *New Statesman*, I was striding down the High Street and ran straight into Yvonne just outside The Queen’s College. We embraced at once. As I unclasped her, I noticed a man standing shyly to one side, and evidently carrying her shopping-parcels. We were introduced. I proposed stepping into the Queen’s Lane coffee house. I don’t remember how it went: I was in Oxford to keep some pressing political and sexual engagements that seemed important at the time. The man seemed nice enough, if a bit wispy, and had an engaging grin. He was called Timothy Bryan, which I also remember thinking was a wispy name. I felt no premonition.

But next time I saw her, my mother was very anxious to know what I thought of him. I said, becoming dimly but eventually alert, that he seemed fine. Did I really, *really* think so? I suddenly understood that I was being asked to *approve* of something. And it all came out in a rush: Yvonne had met him on a little holiday she'd managed to take in Athens, he seemed to understand her perfectly, he was a poet and a dreamer, she had already decided to break it all to my father "The Commander" and was going to live with Mr. Bryan. The main thing I remember thinking, as the sun angled across our old second-floor family apartment, was "Please don't tell me that you waited until Peter and I were old enough." She added, at that moment, with perfect sincerity, that she'd waited until my brother and I were old enough. It was also at about that time — throwing all caution, as they say, to the winds — that she told me she had had an abortion, both *before* my own birth, and after it. The one *after* I could bring myself to think of with equanimity, or at least some measure of equanimity, whereas the one before felt a bit too much like a close shave or a near-miss, in respect of *moi*.

This was the laid-back early 1970s and I had neither the wish nor the ability to be "judgmental." Yvonne was the only member of my family with whom I could discuss sex and love in any case. I was then informed that she and Timothy had another thing in common. He had once been an ordained minister of the Church of England (at the famous church of St.-Martin-in-the-Fields, off Trafalgar Square, as I later discovered) but had seen through organized religion. Both he and she were now devotees of the Maharishi Mahesh Yogi: the sinister windbag who had brought enlightenment to the Beatles in the summer of love. I had to boggle a bit at this capitulation to such a palpable fraud — "Have you given The Perfect Master any money? Has he given you a secret mantra to intone?" — but when the answer to the second question turned out to be a sincere and shy "yes," I forgave her in a burst of laughter in which she (with a slight reserve, I thought) nonetheless joined.

It was arranged that Yvonne and the ex-Rev would come to dine with me in London. Feeling more loyal to my mother than disloyal to my father, I took the happy couple to my favorite Bengali restaurant, The Ganges in Gerrard Street. This was the heart of my culinary leftist Soho, and I knew that the management would be warmly hospitable to any guests of mine. All

went well enough, and I could also affect to be cutting a bit of a figure in my novice years as a scribbler in the capital. A hint of Bloomsbury and Fitzrovia and Soho was, I knew, just the sort of spice that Yvonne would appreciate. I dropped an author's name or two . . . ordered that second carafe with a lazy flick of the hand, paid the bill carelessly and wondered how I would conceal it on my expense account the next day. The former priest Mr. Bryan was not a bad conversationalist, with a fondness for poetry and the quotation of same. Outside in the street, importuned by gypsy taxi drivers, I used the word "fuck" for the first time in my mother's presence, and felt her both bridling a bit and shrugging amusedly at the inevitability of it. At any rate, I could tell that she was happy to be in the metropolis, and happy, too, that I liked her new man well enough. And I still have a rather sharp pang whenever I come to that corner of Shaftesbury Avenue where I kissed her goodbye, because she had been absolutely everything to me in her way and because I was never ever going to see her again.

I think that I must have *talked* to her after that, though, because the curry supper had been in the early fall of 1973 and she telephoned me in London (and this is certainly the last time that I was to hear her voice) at around the time of what some people call the Yom Kippur War and some the Ramadan War, which was in October of that year. This call was for the purpose of advising me that she intended to move to Israel. I completely misinterpreted this as another quasi-spiritual impulse ("Oh, Mummy, honestly": I did still sometimes call her "Mummy") and my impatience earned me a short lecture about how the Jews had made the desert bloom and were exerting themselves in a heroic manner. We were perhaps both at fault: I ought to have been less mocking and dismissive and she might have decided that now if ever was the moment to tell me what she'd been holding back about our ancestral ties. Anyway, I counseled her against removing herself to a war zone, let alone taking someone else's bleeding holy land, on top of her other troubles, and though I didn't know it, we bid farewell. I would give a very great deal to be able to start that conversation over again.

For my father to call was almost unheard-of: his taciturnity was renowned and the telephone was considered an expense in those days. But call he did, and not that many days later, and came to the point with his customary dispatch. "Do you happen to know where your mother is?" I said "no" with

complete honesty, and then felt that slightly sickened feeling that comes when you realize that you are simply but politely not believed. (Perhaps this emotion was the late residue of my own recent complicity with Yvonne and Timothy, but my father did sound distinctly skeptical of my truthful answer.) “Well,” he went on evenly enough, “I haven’t seen or heard from her in days, and her passport isn’t where it usually is.” I forget quite how we left it, but I shall never forget how we resumed that conversation.

What it is to be twenty-four, and fairly new to London, and cutting your first little swath through town. I’d had a few Fleet Street and television jobs and gigs, and had just been hired by one of the best-known literary-political weeklies in the English-speaking world, and was lying in bed one morning with a wonderful new girlfriend when the telephone rang to disclose, as I lifted the receiver, the voice of an old girlfriend. Bizarrely, or so it seemed to my pampered and disordered senses, she asked me the very same question that my father had recently asked. Did I know where my mother was? I have never quite known how to ask forgiveness, but now I wish I had been able to repress the irritable thought that I was getting just a bit too grown-up for this line of inquiry.

Melissa in any case was as brisk and tender as I would have wanted to be if our situations had been reversed. Had I listened to that morning’s BBC news? No. Well, there was a short report about a woman with my surname having been found murdered in Athens. I felt everything in me somehow flying out between my toes. *What?* Perhaps no need to panic, said Melissa sweetly. Had I seen that morning’s London *Times*? No. Well, there was another brief print report about the same event. But listen, would there have been a man involved? Would this woman called Hitchens (not that common a name, I dully thought) have been traveling with anybody? Yes, I said, and gave the probable or presumable name. “Oh dear, then I’m very sorry but it probably is your mum.”

So the rather diffident and wispy ex-Reverend Bryan, so recently my guest at dinner, had bloodily murdered my mother and then taken his own life. Beneath that scanty exterior had lain a raving psycho. That was what all the reports agreed in saying. In some hotel in Athens, the couple had been found dead separately but together, in adjoining rooms. For my father, who was the next person to ring me, this was especially and particularly devastating.

He was not far short of his sixty-fifth birthday. He had also had to reconcile himself to the loss of his adored wife's affection, in a day when divorce was still considered scandalous, and had reluctantly agreed that she would spend much of her private time at the house of another man. But at the respectable boys' prep school where he kept the books, and in the surrounding society of North Oxford, the two of them had had a pact. If invited to a sherry party or a dinner, they would still show up together as if nothing had happened. Now, and on the front pages at that, everything was made known at once, and to everybody. I do not know how he bore the shock, but there was no question of his coming to Athens, and I myself, in any case, was already on my way there and honestly preferred to face it alone.

This lacerating, howling moment in my life was not the first time that the private and the political had intersected, but it was by some distance the most vivid. For many people in my generation, the seizure of power in Greece by militaristic fascists in April 1967 had been one of the definitive moments in what we were retrospectively to call "the Sixties." That a Western European country — the stock phrase "cradle of democracy" was seldom omitted — could have been hijacked by a dictatorship of dark glasses and torturers and steel helmets and yet remain within NATO: the whole idea made a vulgar satire of the Cold War propaganda about any "free world." I had spoken at the Oxford Union alongside Helen Vlachos, the heroic publisher of the Athens daily paper *Kathimerini*, which had closed and padlocked its doors rather than submit to censorship. I had taken part in protests outside the Greek embassy, and passed out numberless leaflets echoing Byron's line "that Greece might yet be free." And then, almost as my mother lay dying, the Athens junta had in fact been overthrown — but only from the extreme right, so that its replacement was even more vicious than its predecessor. Thus it was that when I first saw the city of Pericles and Phidias and Sophocles, its main square was congested with dirty-gray American-supplied tanks, and its wine-dark sea at Phaleron Bay and Sounion full of the sleek shapes of the U.S. Sixth Fleet.

The atmosphere of that week at the end of November 1973 is instantly accessible to me, and in an almost minute-by-minute way. I can remember seeing the students yelling defiance from behind the wrecked gates of the rebellious Athens Polytechnic, after the broad-daylight and undisguised

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massacre of the unarmed anti-junta protestors. I can remember meeting friends with bullet wounds that they dared not take to the hospital. I recall, too, a party in a poor student's crummy upstairs apartment, where those present made the odd gesture of singing "The Internationale" almost under their breath, lest they attract the attention of the ever-prowling secret police. My old notebook still contains the testimony of torture victims, with their phone numbers written backward in my clumsy attempt to protect them if my notes were seized. It was one of my first forays into the world of the death squad and the underground and the republics of fear.

With Yvonne lying cold? You are quite right to ask. But it turns out, as I have found in other ways and in other places, that the separation between personal and public is not so neat. On arrival in Athens, I had of course gone directly to meet the coroner in my mother's case. His name was Dimitrios Kapsaskis. It rang a distinct bell. This was the man who had, without wishing to do so, taken a starring part in that greatest of all Sixties movies, *Z*. In this filmic-political masterpiece by Constantine Costa-Gavras, Kapsaskis testified that the hero Gregory Lambrakis had broken his skull accidentally in a fall, rather than having had it smashed by a secret-police operative. Sitting opposite this shabby official villain and trying to talk objectively about my mother while knowing what was happening to my friends outside on the street was an education of a kind.

It was the same when I had to go to the local police station for other formalities. Captain Nicholas Balaskas faced me across a desk in a forbidding office on Lekkas Street which displayed the blazing phoenix: the compulsory logo and insignia of the dictatorship. At the British embassy, which was then run by a genial old diplomat whose son had been with me at Balliol, I had to sit through a lunch where a reactionary creep of a Labour MP named Francis Noel-Baker gave a lecture about the virtues of the junta and (the first but not the last time I was ever to hear these two arguments in combination) both *denied* that it tortured its prisoners while asserting that it would be quite justified if it *did* do so!

I then had a strange moment of shared mourning, which helped remind me of what I obviously already "knew": namely that my own bereavement was nothing unique. In a run-down restaurant near Syntagma Square I endured a melancholy lunch with Chester Kallman. This once-golden boy,

who W.H. Auden had feared might be “the wrong blond” when they first met in 1939, had since been the life-partner and verse-collaborator of the great poet, the source of much of his misery as well as much of his bliss, and the dedicatee of some especially fervent and consecrated poems. He was fifty-two and looked seventy, with an almost grannyish trembling and protruding lower lip and a quivering hand that spilled his *avgolemono* soup down his already well-encrusted shirtfront. Difficult to picture him as the boy who had once so insouciantly compared himself to Carole Lombard. I had only a few weeks previously gone to Christ Church Cathedral in Oxford to attend Auden’s memorial. My dear friend James Fenton, who had been a protégé of Auden’s and a sometime guest at the Auden-Kallman home in Kirchstetten, had just won the Eric Gregory Award for poetry and decided to invest the prize money in an intrepid voyage to Vietnam that was to yield its own poetic harvest, so I had gone back to Oxford in part to represent him in his absence, as well as to witness a gathering of poets and writers and literary figures, from Stephen Spender to Charles Monteith (discoverer of *Lord of the Flies*), who were unlikely ever to gather in one place again. Kallman, who had about two years left to live, was not especially desirous of hearing about any of this. “I do not wish,” he said slurringly, “to be thought of as Wystan’s *relict*.” Uncharitably perhaps, and even though I knew he had done some original work of his own, I wondered if he seriously expected to be much or long remembered in any other way.

Even this minor moment of pathos was inflected with politics. Kallman had done his level best over the years to seduce the entire rank-and-file of the Hellenic armed forces and had once been threatened with arrest and deportation by a certain Brigadier Tsoumbas. (“*Soom* -bass”: I can still hear his knell-like pronunciation of the dreaded name.) The recent swerve from the extreme right to the even more extreme fascist right was threatening to bring the vile Tsoumbas into high office, and Chester was apprehensive and querulous, with his own safety naturally enough uppermost in mind.

I was going through all of these motions while I awaited a bureaucratic verdict of which I was already fairly sure. My mother had not been murdered. She had, with her lover, contracted a pact of suicide. She took an overdose of sleeping pills, perhaps washed down with a mouthful or two of alcohol, while he — whose need to die must have been very great — took an overdose with

booze also and, to make assurance doubly sure, slashed himself in a hot bath. I shall never be sure what depth of misery had made this outcome seem to her the sole recourse: on the hotel's switchboard record were several attempted calls to my number in London which the operator had failed to connect. Who knows what might have changed if Yvonne could have heard my voice even in her extremity? I might have said something to cheer or even tease her: something to set against her despair and perhaps give her a momentary purchase against the death wish.

A second-to-last piece of wretchedness almost completes this episode. Whenever I hear the dull word "closure," I am made to realize that I, at least, will never achieve it. This is because the Athens police made me look at a photograph of Yvonne as she had been discovered. I will tell you nothing about this except that the scene was decent and peaceful but that she was off the bed and on the floor, and that the bedside telephone had been dislodged from its cradle. It's impossible to "read" this bit of forensics with certainty, but I shall always have to wonder if she had briefly regained consciousness, or perhaps even belatedly regretted her choice, and tried at the very last to stay alive.

At all events, this is how it ends. I am eventually escorted to the hotel suite where it had all happened. The two bodies had had to be removed, and their coffins sealed, before I could get there. This was for the dismally sordid reason that the dead couple had taken a while to be discovered. The pain of this is so piercing and exquisite, and the scenery of the two rooms so nasty and so tawdry, that I hide my tears and my nausea by pretending to seek some air at the window. And there, for the first time, I receive a shattering, full-on view of the Acropolis. For a moment, and like the Berlin Wall and other celebrated vistas when glimpsed for the first time, it almost resembles some remembered postcard of itself. But then it becomes utterly authentic and unique. That temple really must be the Parthenon, and almost near enough to stretch out and touch. The room behind me is full of death and darkness and depression, but suddenly here again and fully present is the flash and dazzle and brilliance of the green, blue, and white of the life-giving Mediterranean air and light that lent me my first hope and confidence. I only wish I could have been clutching my mother's hand for this, too. Yvonne, then, was the exotic and the sunlit when I could easily have had

a boyhood of stern and dutiful English gray. She was the cream in the coffee, the gin in the Campari, the offer of wine or champagne instead of beer, the laugh in the face of bores and purse-mouths and skinflints, the insurance against bigots and prudes. Her defeat and despair were also mine for a long time, but I have reason to know that she wanted me to withstand the woe, and when I once heard myself telling someone that she had allowed me “a second identity” I quickly checked myself and thought, no, perhaps with luck she had represented my first and truest one.

### *A Coda on the Question of Self-slaughter*

I have intermittently sunk myself, over the course of the past four decades or so, into dismal attempts to imagine or think or “feel” myself into my mother’s state of mind as she decided that the remainder of her life would simply not be worth living. There is a considerable literature on the subject, which I have made an effort to scrutinize, but all of it has seemed to me too portentous and general and sociological to be of much help. Suicide-writing in our time, moreover, has mainly been produced long after the act itself ceased to be regarded as ipso facto immoral or as deserving an extra round of postmortem pain and punishment in the afterlife. I was myself rather astounded, when dealing with the Anglican chaplain at the Protestant cemetery in Athens (which was the only resting place consistent with her wishes), to find that this epoch had not quite ended. The sheep-faced Reverend didn’t really want to perform his office at all. He muttered a bit about the difficulty of suicides being interred in consecrated ground, and he may have had something to say about my mother having been taken in adultery . . . At any rate I shoved some money in his direction and he became sulkily compliant as the priesthood generally does. It was fortunate for him, though, that I couldn’t feel any more dislike and contempt for him and for his sickly religion than I already did. If I had been a red-blooded Protestant of any conviction, he would soon enough have found out what a boot felt like when it was planted in his withered backside. (On my way out, through the surrounding Greek Orthodox precincts, I paused to place some red carnations on the huge pile of tribute that surmounted the grave of the great George Seferis, national poet

of the Greeks and foe of all superstitions, whose 1971 funeral had been the occasion for a silent mass demonstration against the junta.)

To an extraordinary degree, modern suicide-writing takes its point of departure from the death of Sylvia Plath. When I myself first read *The Bell Jar*, the phrase of hers that most arrested me was the one with which she described her father's hometown. Otto Plath had originated in Grabow, a dull spot in what used to be called "the Polish corridor." His angst-infected daughter had described this place as "some manic-depressive hamlet in the black heart of Prussia." Her poem "Daddy" must be the strictest verdict passed by a daughter on a male parent since the last reunion of the House of Atreus, with its especially unsettling opinion that, as a result of paternal illuse: "Every woman loves a fascist . . . the boot in the face." \*

My mother's ancestors did in fact come from a small and ultimately rather distraught small town in German-Polish Prussia, and her father had given her mother a truly ghastly time before dematerializing in the fog of war, but Yvonne was not one of those who, having had ill done to her, did "ill in return." She hoped, rather, that it would fall to her to shield others from such pain. I myself don't think, striking though the image may be, that an entire "hamlet" can be manic-depressive. However, I can forgive *la* Plath her possibly subconscious metaphor because most of what I know about manic depression I first learned from *Hamlet*.

"I have, of late," the Prince of Denmark tells us, "but *wherefore I know not* — lost all my mirth." Everyone living has occasionally experienced that feeling, but the lines that accompany it are the best definition of the blues that was ever set down. ("Tired of living, scared of dying" is the next-best

\* The feminist school has often looked in a manner of marked disapproval at her husband, Ted Hughes. I find it difficult to imagine him actually maltreating Sylvia physically, but there's no doubt that he could be quite stupendously wanting in sensitivity. I once went for some drinks with him at the apartment of my friend and editor Ben Sonnenberg, who was by then almost completely immobilized by multiple sclerosis. Hughes droned on for an agonizingly long time about the powers of a faith-healer in the (perhaps somewhat manic depressive) Devonshire hamlet where he lived. This shaman, it seemed, was beyond praise for his ability with crippled people. On and on went the encomium. I could not meet Ben's eye but from his wheelchair he eventually asked with commendable lightness: "How is he with sufferers from MS?" "Oh, not bad at all," replied Hughes, before blithely resuming with an account of how this quack could cure disabled farm-animals as well.

encapsulation, offered in “Old Man River.”) Who would carry on with the unending tedium and potential misery if they did not think that extinction would be even less desirable or — as it is phrased in another of Hamlet’s mood-swing soliloquies — if “the ever-lasting” had “not set his canon ’gainst self-slaughter”?

There are fourteen suicides in eight works of Shakespeare, according to Giles Romilly Fedden’s study of the question, and these include the deliberate and ostensibly noble ones of Romeo and Juliet and of Othello. It’s of interest that only Hamlet’s darling Ophelia, whose death at her own hands is not strictly intentional, is the object of condemnation by the clergy. My own indifference to religion and refusal to credit any babble about an afterlife has, alas, denied me the hearty satisfaction experienced by Ophelia’s brother Laertes, who whirls on the moralizing cleric to say:

I tell thee, churlish priest,  
A ministering angel shall my sister be,  
When thou liest howling.

Memorable to be sure, but too dependent on the evil and stupidity of the heaven/hell dualism, and of scant use to me in deciding how it was that a thoughtful, loving, cheerful person like Yvonne, who was in reasonable health, would want to simply give up. I thought it might have something to do with what the specialists call “anhedonia,” or the sudden inability to derive pleasure from anything, most especially from the pleasurable. Al Alvarez, in his very testing and demanding study of the subject, *The Savage God*, returns often to the suicide of Cesare Pavese, who took his own life at the apparent height of his powers. “In the year before he died he turned out two of his best novels . . . One month before the end he received the Strega Prize, the supreme accolade for an Italian writer. ‘I have never been so much alive as now,’ he wrote, ‘never so young.’ A few days later he was dead. Perhaps the sweetness itself of his creative powers made his innate depression all the harder to bear.”

This is almost exactly what William Styron once told me in a greasy diner in Hartford, Connecticut, about a golden moment in Paris when he had been waiting to be given a large cash prize, an emblazoned ribbon and medal of literary achievement and a handsome dinner to which all his friends

had been bidden. “I looked longingly across the lobby at the street. And I mean *longingly*. I thought, if I could just hurl myself through those heavy revolving doors I might get myself under the wheels of that merciful bus. And then the agony could stop.” \*

But my poor Yvonne had never suffered from an excess of reward and recognition, of the kind that sometimes does make honest people feel ashamed or even unworthy. However, what she had done was to fall in love, as she had pined so long to do, and then find out that it was fractionally too late for that. In theory she had everything she might have desired — a charming man who adored her; an interval in which her boys were grown and she need not guard a nest; a prospect of leisure and a non-vengeful husband. Many English married women of her class and time would have considered themselves fortunate. But in practice she was on the verge of menopause, had exchanged a dutiful and thrifty and devoted husband for an improvident and volatile man, and then discovered that what “volatile” really meant was . . . manic depression. She may not have needed or wanted to die, but she needed and wanted someone who did need and did want to die. This is beyond anhedonia.

Examples like hers are also outside the scope of Emile Durkheim’s sweeping account of the place of self-slaughter in alienated and deracinated and impersonal societies. I have always admired Durkheim for pointing out that the Jewish people invented their own religion (as opposed to the preposterous and totalitarian view that it was the other way about) but his categorization of suicide doesn’t include the Yvonne-sized niche that I have so long been trying to identify and locate. He classified the act under the three headings of the egoistic, the altruistic, and the anomic.

\* At this diner we were served by a pimply and stringy-haired youth of appallingly dank demeanor. Bringing back Bill’s credit card he remarked that it bore a name that was almost the same as that of a famous writer. Bill said nothing. Tonelessly, the youth went on: “He’s called William Styron.” I left this up to Bill, who again held off until the kid matter-of-factly said, “Anyway, that guy’s book saved my life.” At this point Styron invited him to sit down, and he was eventually persuaded that he was at the same table as the author of *Darkness Visible*. It was like a transformation scene: he told us brokenly of how he’d sought and found the needful help. “Does this happen to you a lot?” I later asked Styron. “Oh, *all* the time. I even get the police calling up to ask if I’ll come on the line and talk to the man who’s threatening to jump.”

The “egoistic” is misleadingly titled, because it really refers to suicide as a reaction to social fragmentation or atomization: to periods when old certainties or solidarities are decomposing and people feel panic and insecurity and loneliness. (Thus, a corollary to it is the observable fact that suicide rates decline during wartime, when people rally round a flag and also see their own small miseries in better proportion.) The “altruistic” also has a wartime connotation, in that it signifies the willingness to lay down one’s life for the good of the larger collective, or conceivably even the smaller collective such as the family or — Captain Oates on Scott’s doomed expedition — the group. Of this phenomenon, Albert Camus provided a nice précis by saying: “What is called a reason for living is also an excellent reason for dying.” Alvarez extends Durkheim’s tropes to include religious and tribal fanaticism, such as the kamikaze pilots or those Hindus who were ecstatically willing to hurl themselves under the wheels of the divinely powered Juggernaut. The “anomic” suicide, finally, is the outcome of a sudden and jarring change in the person’s social position. “A searing divorce or a death in the family” are among the examples Alvarez gives as typical.

It’s of interest that this taxonomy appears to say nothing about the so-called suicidal “type.” From experience I should say that there is, perhaps, such a type, and that it can be dangerously frivolous to say that attempted suicides are only crying for “help.” I have known several who, after some apparently half-hearted “bid,” or even bids, made a decisive end of themselves. But Yvonne was by no imaginable measure the “type.” She abhorred self-pity and suspected anything that was too ostentatious or demonstrative. However, she had fallen in with someone who very probably was bipolar or in other ways the “type,” and she had certainly undergone the wrenching and jarring and abrupt loss of social position and security (and respectability) that had always been of such importance to her. Couple this with the gnawing fear that she was losing her looks . . . anyway, for me a searing marital separation had indirectly led to “a death in the family.”

Durkheim’s categories seem almost too grandiose to take account of her suicide (how we all would like our deaths to possess a touch of meaning). The egoistic doesn’t really cover it at all; nor did the altruistic when I first read about it; and “anomie” to my Marxist ear used to be what mere individuals had instead of what, with a better understanding of their class position,

they would have recognized as alienation. Yvonne's was "anomic," then, but with a hint of the altruistic also. Of the two notes that she left, one (which, pardon me, I do not mean to quote) was to me. The other was to whoever had to shoulder the responsibility of finding her, or rather them. I was quite undone by the latter note as well: it essentially apologized for the mess and inconvenience. Oh Mummy, so like you. In her private communication she gave the impression of believing that this was best for all concerned, and that it was in some way a small sacrifice from which those who adored her would benefit in the long run. She was wrong there.

For the anomic, Cesare Pavese almost certainly provided the best text by observing drily enough that "no one ever lacks a good reason for suicide." And Alvarez furnishes self-slaughterers with the kindest epitaph by writing that, in making death into a conscious choice: "Some kind of minimal freedom — the freedom to die in one's own way and in one's own time — has been salvaged from the wreck of all those unwanted necessities."

I once spoke at a memorial meeting for an altruistic suicide: the Czech student Jan Palach, who set himself on fire in Wenceslas Square in Prague to defy the Russian invaders of his country. But since then I have had every chance to become sickened by the very idea of "martyrdom." The same monotheistic religions that condemn suicide by individuals have a tendency to exalt and overpraise self-destruction by those who kill themselves (and others) with a hymn or a prayer on their lips. Alvarez, like almost every other author, gets "Masada" wrong: he says that "hundreds of Jews put themselves to death" there "rather than submit to the Roman legions." In fact, religious fanatics who had been expelled even by other Jewish communities first murdered their own families and then drew lots for the exalted duty of murdering one another. Only the very last ones had to settle for killing themselves. So, divided in mind once more, I often want to agree with Saul Bellow's Augie March who, when rebuked by his elders and enjoined to conform and to "accept the data of experience," replies: "it can never be right to offer to die, and if that's what the data of experience tell you, then you must get along without them." Yet my next subject is a man who for a long time braved death for a living and would have been perfectly willing to offer to die in a cause that he considered to be (and that was) larger than himself.

